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Home College Series.

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CHARLOTTE BRONTË

BY MISS JENNIE M. BINGHAM.

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And what a young man may do in this respect, a young woman, and both old men and old women, may do.

NEW YORK, Jan., 1883.

J. H. VINCENT.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË, so singularly gifted, living a life so sad that it has very appropriately been called a tragedy, was born April 21, 1816, at Thornton, England. When she was four years old the family removed to Haworth, a little secluded village among the hills of Yorkshire. A recent visitor to Haworth gives us this picture of it: "It was on a soft, gray morning in the middle of August that we set forth on our pilgrimage. Immediately, on leaving Keighley, we began to toil along the road which, by an almost unbroken ascent, leads to Haworth. At every step we took we seemed to be leaving in our rear all that was pleasant or cheerful; the hills on either side becoming more and more destitute of trees, more and more brown in color, while the hedges which had hitherto bounded the road were exchanged for stone dykes, with no soft covering of moss to conceal their nakedness. Had it not been for the continuous line of small houses stretching along the highway, and the villages clustered on the hill-sides, the sense of desolation in the scenery would have been painfully oppressive. For two miles or so before arriving at Haworth the village is visible from the road, and a very eagle's eyrie it looks, perched up on the moors rising brown and somber behind it. A melancholy home, in truth, for a spirit like Charlotte Brontë's must have been that dreary Haworth parsonage; no trees sheltering or surrounding it, and yet all pleasant views shut out; nothing visible from its windows but the desolate-looking, walled-in garden, with one stunted lilac-bush in the middle of it, and, beyond, the wide, crowded church-yard, encroaching more and more upon the grim, silent moors, crossed often by fitful gleams of sunlight or wreaths of mist. Nothing

can be more desolate and forlorn than the appearance it presents."

There were six children in the family very near of an age, Charlotte being the third. The old woman who came to nurse Mrs. Brontë in her last illness tells us how at that time the six little creatures used to walk out hand in hand toward the glorious wild moors which, in after days, they loved so passionately; the elder ones taking care of the toddling wee things. They were grave and silent beyond their years, subdued, probably, by the presence of serious illness in the house.

"You would not have known there was a child in the house, they were such still, noiseless, good little creatures," she says. "Maria, seven years old, would shut herself up in the children's study, with a newspaper, and be able to tell one every thing when she came out—debates in Parliament, and I don't know what all. She was as good as a mother to her sisters and brother. I used to think them spiritless, they were so different from any children I had ever seen. In part I set it down to a fancy Mr. Brontë had of not letting them have meat to eat. He thought that children should be brought up simply and hardily, so they had nothing but potatoes for their dinner; but they never seemed to wish for any thing else."

They never had a childhood. The children of the parish were invited to the parsonage on a memorable afternoon, and when they had come Charlotte and her sisters were in despair. Their guests knew nothing but childish sports, and the Brontë children did not know how to play. Very gravely Charlotte asked to be taught, and the guests, instead of having a nice visit, devoted the time to missionary work, trying to teach the sedate children of the parsonage the plays of childhood. This was time wasted, evidently, for the young philosophers were only too glad to be left alone again with their studies and intellectual speculations.

Of the mother of Charlotte Brontë there is little to be

told. Her married life was a brief one, shadowed by constant sickness. "She was a sensitively organized woman, and was gifted with exceeding refinement and beauty of mind and person." It has been surmised that she rather feared her irritable, excitable husband. Instances are recorded showing Mr. Brontë's disposition to play the part of domestic tyrant. A relative of his wife had sent her a pretty figured dress, over which her gentle heart had, no doubt, rejoiced in happy and harmless vanity. Seeing that its brightness gave offense to her husband she carefully put it away in a bureau drawer out of his sight, but evidently not out of his remembrance. One day, when she was lying in her darkened room with a nervous headache, she heard Mr. Brontë's footsteps in the room overhead where her treasure was hidden, and when next she saw her pretty gift it was a wreck. He had taken the scissors and cut it into shreds! In like manner he disposed of some fancy-colored shoes sent his little daughter.

Bishop D. W. Clark says: "Even in their early childhood, an unnatural, not to say diseased, activity of the brain was manifested in these children. They seem to have been utterly neglected by their father so far as any personal attention was concerned. After the death of the mother, Miss Branwell, the mother's sister, became the housekeeper at the parsonage. She was a kind, strict, housewifely old maid, ever mortally afraid of catching cold, and who could not regard without dread the inhospitable northern moors.

"Sad home and sad pupilage! It was enough to derange even a sound and healthy temperament. The father dined by himself, the six children ate their potatoes by themselves, and either sat in their "study"—they never had a nursery—where the eldest, just seven years old, read the newspaper and gleaned the political intelligence, or they wandered hand in hand to spend hours on the moors. Their bodies were played tricks with, but not their minds. The intellect was

left to develop as it might, under nature's influence. Feeble health made them precocious; each child was a phenomenon. They had no notion of play; they never made a noise; their amusements were intellectual speculation; their interests those of the great outer world—wars and politics, warriors and statesmen.

“It was an education fatal to that just balance of powers which constitutes happiness, but considering their peculiar organization, fostering the intellect. Nourishing food, tender maternal watchfulness, plenty of playthings, and the little lessons said as a task each day, would have made happier and better women; they could afterward have taken their place in life without shyness or reserve; and the brother might have grown into a man, not sunk, after a boyhood of extraordinary promise, into a brute. But on the mere question of genius, we should have missed some of Currer Bell's most vivid scenes; there probably would have been no Currer Bell.”

“These sisters,” says the “Christian Remembrancer,” “had early conceived the ambition of being heard and felt beyond their own narrow circle. The habit of letting the imagination loose to devise plots and scenes had been theirs from childhood. It was the household custom among these girls to sew until nine o'clock at night, at which hour the aunt retired, and her nieces' duties for the day were considered done. They would then put away their work, and pace the long, low dining room, backward and forward, up and down—often with the candles extinguished for economy's sake—their figures glancing into the fire-light and out into the shadow perpetually. At this time they talked over their troubles and planned for the future. In after years this was the time for discussing together the plots of their novels, and reading the chapters when written. And again, still later, this was the time for the last surviving sister to walk alone round and round the desolate room.”

When Charlotte was five years old the invalid mother died, and the two older daughters were sent to a boarding-school, where, later, Charlotte and Emily were sent to join them. The older sisters both died from the treatment they received at this school, and it would have ended the lives of the younger girls had they not been recalled. As it was, their health was permanently injured. Charlotte never grew an inch after leaving. She was the smallest of women, and attributed her physical weakness to that dreadful experience. But she had a writer's revenge, and in "Jane Eyre" drew such a picture of the school that all the neighborhood immediately identified it, reproducing her oldest sister as Helen Burns. Little did the teachers dream that the frail, timid pupil, who submitted to discipline so quietly, would make their cruelty immortal. From this time she remained at home, caring for the three younger children, whom she loved with all the strong affection of her great nature. Branwell, the only son, grew up to be the curse of their home. In his boyhood he shared his sisters' literary tastes, and was the handsomest, liveliest, and wittiest of them all. While the seclusion of their lives made the sisters amazingly shy, it made him long, with a sort of mania, for the world from which he was shut out. He soon fell into dissolute habits, became more and more depraved, till not one redeeming trait was left. Until he died, three years later, they lived in terror of their lives from his violence.

Charlotte was the plainest of them all in personal appearance, yet so spiritual and refined in organization that she was a marvel to those who could not know that a great soul was enshrined in her little body. Her head was beautifully shaped and very large, while her great brown eyes beamed with animation. Her features were plain; but the face, always so colorless, was remarkable for its power of expression. Her fingers were never still, and when excited she would clinch them together with a force that often left a bruise for days.

In girlhood she was not very reliable in orthodox matters; of religion, in its sunny aspect and beautifying influence, she knew little, and it was not surprising that she hated with girlish vim the long-faced curates who occasionally appeared at the parsonage table. When the question of earning her living came to be considered, she decided to seek a position as governess. Her definite acquirements, however, were few. She studied nature as an enthusiast, and when she tried to be a botanist found that she loved flowers too well to dissect them. Her austere parent did not encourage music, and so she could not rely upon abilities in that line. Very bravely she entered upon the uncongenial task of teaching, and attempted a second siege after being prostrated by the first. Only when sickness, brought on by wretchedness, compelled her, did she relinquish her plan.

Up to this time these sisters had written much that was tolerably successful, but found that it brought them little support; so Charlotte wrote to Southey for counsel. He gave them a cordial invitation to visit the "Lakes," which the lack of funds would not allow them to do. Charlotte then proposed to Emily that they open a school in the parsonage. To fit themselves for this they entered a school in Brussels. After six months they were offered positions there, one of which Charlotte accepted. This step was a mistake, as the pages of "Villette" show. Here Charlotte Brontë ceased to be a girl, and came, through a baptism of tears, to her womanhood. Her heart had been captured by an inmate of the school, who taught her French in return for lessons in English. She was the one English girl in the house, shut off from all society, so long among "hearts cut from a marble quarry," that it is not a wonder she bestowed all the wealth of her affection on this one friend. She had learned, what she declares in "Jane Eyre," "Human beings *must* love something." Paul Emanuel, the hero of "Villette," is a portrait of the man she loved. One day, when she was

in despair, despising herself for staying, but feeling too weak to flee, she rushed from the house and along the street, not caring whither she went. The bells of a church arrested her footsteps. She wandered in and knelt down with others on the stone pavement. It was an old solemn church, purpled by light shed through stained glass. When the others had gone to the confessional and returned consoled, she mechanically rose and went forward. The English girl had never before been in the confessional, and was ignorant of the *formulae*. She saw before her an elderly man, whose benign face was quickly turned toward her, when she said, half in apology and half in fright, "My father, I am Protestant." But she received such kindly counsel, after she had explained her lonely position and great sufferings, that she never forgot it. He was kind to her when she needed kindness, and though she never returned, as he invited her to, she pays him tribute in her book. Soon after she returned home, a sad woman now, chastened by a sorrow she never told. She bridged this bitter experience with active work, performed with merciless disregard for bodily or mental condition, and won her peace at last.

The next venture these sisters made was to collect their poems in a volume, with the title, "Poems of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell," but it was a failure. Charlotte then offered her novel, "The Professor," but it was declined. The reasons assigned by the publishers were "lack of startling incident" and "thrilling excitement." Conscious of inward strength, she deliberately sat down to write a book that publishers would publish and the popular taste approve. "Jane Eyre" was begun under the additional anxiety of her father's threatened blindness. She had accompanied him to Manchester for medical help, and here, among strangers, with her first story returned on her hands, she set about proving the view she had recently laid down to her sisters, that it was a mistake to make a heroine always handsome. "I will

prove to you that you are wrong," she said. "I will show you a heroine as plain and small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours." When once in the train of the story she wrote continuously, and by the time she had carried her heroine through the interview with the insane woman and effected her escape from Thornfield, she had wrought herself into a fever. Bishop Clark says, "Certainly it was a dazzling power to find herself possessed of—what masculine force of style! what vivid life in the scenes! what daring originality in the situations! what a grasp of detail!"

She sent her book to a London publishing house, under her masculine literary name. The members of the firm successively sat up all night reading the manuscript, and the letter addressed to Currer Bell, Esq., was decidedly favorable. It was published within two months. But who was Currer Bell? The publishers were as much in the dark as the world at large. Mrs. Gaskell tells us of the journey Charlotte and Anne took to London to prove their identity. How their short walk from the Chapter Coffee-House occupied an hour because of their fear of the crossings, and Mr. Smith's astonishment when Charlotte put into his hands his own letter which had excited such a disturbance at Haworth parsonage a little before.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded, finding it hard to believe that a woman wrote "Jane Eyre," and that the two young ladies dressed in black, of slight figure and diminutive stature, could be the embodied Currer and Acton Bell for whom curiosity had been hunting so eagerly in vain. Charlotte afterward spoke of the strong contrasts of that day in London. In the morning utter strangers, that night guests of people delighted to show them attentions, and in the midst of a distinguished audience listening to Jenny Lind. Dickens, then in the zenith of his great popularity, Thackeray, and Miss Martineau were among the many writers who quickly recognized the genius of the unknown author; and

George Eliot, then a maiden of four and twenty, sympathizing with the feeling which led this timid writer to use a masculine assumed name, expressed admiration for the book, but took issue with the writer respecting Rochester's right to marry again.

Very soon the charge was widely circulated that Charlotte Brontë had satirized Thackeray, under the character of Rochester, bringing to light the sorrows of his private life. Her publishers immediately corrected the report, and when she next visited London she was introduced to Thackeray, who afterward paid her this tribute: "I remember the trembling, little frame, the little hand, the great, honest eyes. She gave me the impression of being a very pure, lofty, and high-minded person. As one thinks of that life, so noble, so lovely, . . . of that passion for truth, . . . of those nights of eager study, swarming fancies, invention, depression, elation, prayer; as one reads the necessarily incomplete, though most touching and admirable, history of the heart that throbbed in this one little frame, . . . with what awe do we await the to-morrow, when that which is now but darkly seen shall be clear. How well I remember the delight and wonder and pleasure with which I read 'Jane Eyre,' sent to me by an author whose name and sex were then alike unknown to me; and how, my own work pressing upon me, I could not, having taken the volume up, lay it down until it was read through."

She was too shy to enjoy society, and had a great horror of being lionized. She wrote to a friend from London, "It was proposed to me to see Charles Dickens, Lady Morgan, Madame Trollope, and some others, but I was aware that these introductions would bring a degree of notoriety I was not disposed to encounter. I declined, therefore, with thanks." She attended one of Thackeray's readings, and he, proud of her presence, singled her out for special attention. Under the gaze of curious eyes that were at once turned upon

her, she suffered torture; she hurried away, never to go again.

Emily Brontë was the strangest of this strange family. Charlotte has pictured her in "Shirley," which followed "Jane Eyre." She was once bitten by a mad dog, but came to her own rescue by seizing a hot iron and burning the poisoned flesh, withholding the fact from the household until the danger was over. She wrote a book as weird and strange as her own nature, yet showing marks of genius. She died soon after the brother, and Anne, the youngest sister, six months later. The three were buried within a year. Anne died at the sea-shore, whither Charlotte had taken her in hope of recovery. She thus pathetically describes her return to her desolate home. It is sad to find that vigorous pen expressing as forcibly her own keen anguish as the scenes of her own imagination: "I got here a little before eight o'clock. All was clean and bright, waiting for me. Papa and the servants were well, and all received me with an affection which should have consoled. The dogs seemed in strange ecstasy. I am certain they regarded me as the harbinger of others. The dumb creatures thought, as I was returned, those who had been so long absent were not far behind. I left papa soon, and went into the dining-room; I shut the door. . . . I tried to be glad that I was come home. . . . I have always been glad before . . . except once, . . . even then I was cheered. But this time joy was not to be the sensation. I felt that the house was all silent, . . . the rooms were empty. I remembered where the three were laid, . . . in what narrow, dark dwellings, . . . never more to re-appear on earth. So the sense of desolation and bitterness took possession of me. The agony that was to be undergone, and was not to be avoided, came on. I underwent it, and passed a dreary evening and night and a mournful to-morrow. I do not know how life will pass, but I certainly do feel confidence in Him who has upheld me hitherto. Solitude may be

cheered, and made endurable beyond what I can believe. The great trial is when evening closes and night approaches. At that hour we used to assemble in the dining-room, . . . we used to talk. I sat by myself; necessarily I am silent."

She lived with her father, haunted by fears for his health and her own, in a solitude which sometimes became frightful to her, but which she could seldom be prevailed on to leave. She wrote to her friend: "As for me, it would be presumptuous in me to calculate on a long life, . . . a truth obvious enough. For the rest, we are all in the hands of Him who apportions his gifts, health or sickness, length or brevity of days, as is best for the receiver: to him who has work to do, time will be given in which to do it; for him to whom no task is assigned, the season of rest will come sooner."

A letter, written to G. H. Lewes, gives a glimpse at this period of her life: "It is about a year and a half since you wrote to me, but it seems a longer time, because, since then, it has been my lot to pass some black mile-stones in the journey of life. Since then there have been intervals when I have ceased to care about literature and critics and fame; when I have lost sight of whatever was prominent in my thoughts at the first publication of 'Jane Eyre;' but now I want these things to come back vividly, if possible, consequently it was a pleasure to receive your note. I wish you did not think me a woman. I wish all reviewers believed 'Curren Bell' to be a man; they would be more just to him. You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex; where I am not what you consider graceful, you will condemn me. All mouths will be open against that first chapter, and that first chapter is true as the Bible; nor is it exceptional. Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity. It is not on those terms or with such ideas I ever took pen in hand; and if it is only on such terms my writing will be tolerated, I shall

pass away from the public and trouble it no more. Out of obscurity I came, to obscurity I can easily return. Standing afar off, I now watch to see what will become of 'Shirley.' My expectations are very low, and my anticipations somewhat sad and bitter; still I earnestly conjure you to say honestly what you think; there is no consolation in flattery. As for condemnation, I cannot see why I should fear it; there is no one but myself to suffer therefrom, and both happiness and suffering in this life soon pass away."

Now thirty-five years old, she began to write her last work, "Villette." It was her best-beloved brain-child, and contains her finest writing. Her biographer says: "The passion of love was never more finely depicted than in her novels, and the best of her men are lovers. The womanhood of all her heroines we admire, but she has not sketched, in all her work, a proud and fond mother, happy in her home and children."

Among the few of her father's acquaintances whom she knew well was Mr. Nicholls, his curate. From him came a proposal of marriage. For herself Charlotte preferred her spinster state; but she realized that her father's active life was drawing to its close, and believed that this kindly gentleman would be a pleasant companion for him as he grew old and infirm. But, to her astonishment, he objected, in the most violent manner, and the obedient daughter of thirty-seven quietly submitted. Soon afterward, however, Mr. Brontë, with his usual inconsistency, proposed to recall Mr. Nicholls; and on a June morning, 1854, she became Charlotte Nicholls. She wrote to her friend: "What I taste of happiness is of the soberest order. Providence offers me this destiny. Doubtless, then, it is best for me."

She entered into her husband's interests and occupations as much as she could, but found that she was unfitted for an active life. He cared nothing for her celebrity as an author. One night, when the two sat alone, listening to the wind sighing over the moors, she thought it a fitting time to tell

him that she was writing another story. "If you were not with me I should be writing now," she said; and then she went to her desk, and brought from it the freshly-written manuscript. He heard her read it, remarked upon its opening pages as recalling "Jane Eyre," and listened to her plan regarding it. It was laid away that night, and never touched by her again. Her health, always delicate, began to fail rapidly, until "a wren would have starved on what she ate." Then she took to her bed, too weak to sit up. A wandering delirium came on. Wakening for an instant from this stupor of intelligence, she saw her husband's sad face, and caught the sound of some murmured words of prayer that God would spare her.

"O!" she whispered, "I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us; we have been so happy."

Early on Saturday morning, March 31, 1855, the solemn tolling of Haworth Church bell spoke forth the fact of her death to the villagers, who had known her from a child, and whose hearts shivered within them, as they thought of the two sitting desolate and alone in the old gray house.

Some years after Mr. Brontë's death Grace Greenwood visited Haworth, and thus writes of the old church: "Never shall I forget my feelings on entering! First a chill from the senseless dampness of the building; then a sense of terrible oppression. I have been into many old churches, but never one which seemed so frightfully close and unwholesome. It had about it a strange odor of mortal decay, as though exhalations were coming up, through the very stones, from the charnel-house beneath. I only wondered that the delicate Brontë sisters lived so long as they did, having to sit through three long services every Sunday in that dreadful place. The family are all buried in the chancel, one above another. Here, above her dead sisters, Charlotte knelt, during the ceremony of marriage. We were shown the register of her marriage, with her name written in a trembling hand."

Miss Martineau found something inexpressibly affecting in this frail little creature, who, under such a heavy weight of suffering and solitude, had done such wonderful things. She says of Charlotte Brontë: "In her vocation she had, in addition to the deep intuitions of a gifted woman, the strength of a man, the patience of a hero, and the conscientiousness of a saint."

She wrote the matchless love-story of the age, dealing with one of the most complex of social problems, and taught her sister-women the way to convert mental power into riches, obstacles into opportunities.

Here is her idea of the source of happiness, as coming from one of her characters: "No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to *cultivate* happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted and tilled. Happiness is a glory, shining far down upon us out of heaven. She is a divine dew which the soul, on certain of its summer mornings, feels gently dropping upon it from the amaranth bloom and golden fruitage of Paradise."

She thus quaintly gives expression to her democratic spirit: "Pedigree and social position are my third-class lodgers, to whom can be assigned only the small sitting-room and little back bedroom."

Laura Holloway, a recent biographer of Charlotte Brontë, says: "There never was a character more susceptible to, and more influenced by, personal environment than that of Charlotte Brontë. If her lot had fallen in pleasant places, with genial company of other children, and the guiding influence of those great minds that learned too late to love her, she would have shown less of the wild-flower grown in the wilderness than she did. She could not, then, have deemed Rochester's imperiousness heroic, or even manly; she would have seen humanity in its truest phases, less in the lightning and storm, and more in the still, small voice that sings in

every true heart. The wonder is that the heart of Jane Eyre is so unscarred by hardship and neglect, by misunderstanding and the fatality of suffering from no self-inflicted wound, as it is. As she teaches her pupil her own childhood seems to be renewed by the gracious and invisible touch of a divine Healer's hand. A smile of happier thought breaks over the patient brow; the iron that has entered into her soul no longer pains her; years of heart-ache and distress vanish like the early mist. Such is the resuscitative vital power of noble natures only.

“In studying this strange life we cannot help wondering at the surprising courage exhibited in it, or at the gray shadows of solitude that rested over it. Only those

‘ who have knowledge . . .
How dreary 'tis for women to sit still
On winter nights, by solitary fires,
And hear the nations praising them far off,’

could understand her life, or appreciate the perpetual loneliness of her whose name had reached even the camp-fires on our Western wilds, and been echoed over the snow-clad mountain-peaks of the distant Ural chain! Of all the women of England of the present century, the two who may be ranked as her worthiest successors, as writers, are Mrs. Browning and George Eliot. The life-histories of both these women are of equal interest with their authorship. They all drew, out of sorrow first, and then out of love, the fullness and richness of their lives, and wrote from their hearts, as well as their minds.

“All over both continents the name of Charlotte Brontë is venerated. Those who once enjoyed the priceless privilege of looking into her pure, frank face, touching in its weariness, sublime in its patient, trustful expression, whose eyes were ever looking yearningly into the future to find the promises of the past realized, whose lips were tightly closed

on all the revealings of her own heart, could never doubt the faith that sustained her. Her religion was as broad as her conception of life was earnest and true."

CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

[THOUGHT-OUTLINE TO HELP THE MEMORY.]

Date of birth? Description of Haworth? Peculiarities of childhood? Mrs. Brontë? Mr. Brontë's disposition? What Bishop Clark says? The early literary habits of the sisters? Boarding-school experience, and how made immortal? The brother's career?

Charlotte's personal appearance? Teaching? Experience at Brussels in the old church? Poems? "The Professor?" Why declined?

Circumstances of writing "Jane Eyre?" How received by London publishing houses? Her *nom de plume*? How she was received by London society? What Thackeray says? Loneliness? "Shirley" and "Villette?" Married? What was date of death? What Miss Martineau says? What Mrs. Holloway says?

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